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YCS makes friends with woodland walks

by Erling Friis-Baastad

Each summer for almost 25 years, the Yukon Conservation Society has been taking visitors and locals on guided walks through the woods around Whitehorse.

The last Free Hike of this summer's trail guiding program took place on August 19; the following day, trail guide co-ordinator Ceildhe Dabbs talked about the value of this program.

Botanist Jim Pojar leads a hike on Grey Mountain.
(photo: Yukon Conservation Society)

"It's one of the ways the Yukon Conservation Society gives back to the community," said Dabbs, a University of Victoria nursing student who was born and raised in the Yukon.

"It gets people out to enjoy the area around Whitehorse and at the same time gets them involved, as we get to tell them a little bit about what we're doing at the society.

"We like to get people interested in the Yukon and we find, if we give people a really enjoyable experience they tend to be more appreciative."

Walk guides avoid preaching conservation to people, she said. "Being really in their face isn't going to do anything to encourage them."

Whether the subject of wilderness conservation even comes up, "really depends on the group we take out. If we get a group that's really interested in conservation we might talk a little more from that angle."

Most importantly, "we want people to enjoy the experience."

Guides try not to prejudge. "You meet people and you don't know their background and it turns out they're involved in a conservation group back in the States." And yes, this goes for RVers too.

There are several kinds of hikes for tourists and locals to choose from. The two-hour Canyon City hike is especially popular with tourists. More locals join in for the

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Whitehorse area hikes to places like Grey Mountain and Fish Lake. These can take up to four hours, though it's flexible.

Dabbs recalled one group at Fish Lake. "They had incredible weather and ended up going quite a bit further than normally." The guide told Dabbs that her party got "so excited they were actually skipping through the meadows."

Each summer begins for the employees of the program with a training week, said Dabbs. YCS brings in guest speakers to discuss subjects like Whitehorse geology and botany with the guides, who also avail themselves of the YCS library and the public library and the MacBride Museum.

Though organizers build a summer's program on materials from the previous season, each year is somewhat different, which results in repeat visits from locals.

Among the things participants learned from the five YCS tour guides this summer were, that Grey Mountain's limestone rose from a primeval sea after a collision of tectonic plates, and that the clay cliffs were formed when the Yukon River cut through layers of silt once deposited in a glacial lake.

They learned about First Nations history and plant lore, gold rush history as it played out in Canyon City, and much, much more.

The Kid Ed-ventures hikes are especially popular, with local children, their parents, day cares, and the guides themselves. There are two types of hikes, those for four-to six-year olds and those for seven-to-10 year olds.

"Each week we do a different theme," said Dabbs. Walks are interspersed with crafts and other creative activities.

"We're not trying to get them to remember a bunch of facts, but just get them curious about nature in general and promote a respect for it at the same time."

Once again, she stressed, guides avoid preaching.

"The kids are quite amazing," she said. 'They do tend to remember." Children have returned to the program for a second and third time and astounded guides by remembering everything they had first been told about local plants, for instance. And at the end of a walk guides often overhear children asking to be brought back to the program the following week.

These kids' hikes are especially popular with day-care centres.

All these years of taking children and adults, some of whom aren't in the best of shape, have been delightfully accident free, said Dabbs. And no one has been chased up a tree by a bear.

In fact, the tours have never encountered a bear in all the years of the program. But guides are prepared for many eventualities. They carry bear spray and first aid kits, and they are trained in first aid and CPR. "We only used one Band-Aid this year," Dabbs said with a chuckle.

The Canyon City hikes tend to attract more elderly people, so two guides are assigned to those walks, just in case. However, elderly tourists do the course just fine. Dabbs mentioned one woman from Ontario who was in her late 70s, had had two hip replacements and enthusiastically took on the full Canyon City walk.

"People are really quite surprised that they had such a good time and all for free," said Dabbs.

In fact, many participants, tourists and locals, decide to join the YCS after a walk.

As well as Canyon City Hikes, kids' hikes and regularly scheduled local hikes, the YCS also sponsors special theme hikes over the course of the summer.

Jim Pojar, executive director of CPAWS, led one group over Grey Mountain on Parks Day in July. Botanist Rosamund Pojar led a plant walk.

YCS forestry co-ordinator Karen Baltgailis led a theme hike as did Louis Rifkin, the energy co-ordinator, who, not surprisingly, took people on a fascinating tour of the Whitehorse Landfill.

While the Free Hikes are finished for the season, YCS is already thinking about next year. The hikes will be somewhat different next summer, so people who participated in the program this year, will want to check out the 2006 offerings when they are decided upon.

Meanwhile, more information about YCS and the Whitehorse Trail Guiding Program can be found on the web at www.yukonconservation.org.

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